
Secular Judaism and Progressive Politics

by Mitchell Silver

It is not necessary to complete the work, but neither can you refrain from advancing it.
— Rabbi Tarfon, *Babylonian Talmud*

The progressive political tradition is a crucial element in Secular Judaism. I am tempted to claim it is an essential element, for although it is logically possible to have an apolitical or politically conservative Secular Judaism, I think that possibility cannot be successfully realized. A vigorous Secular Judaism will be progressive.

What Is Progressivism?

The essential leftist belief is that human beings can intentionally change things for the better. The amount and speed of the change called for determines how far left a position is. The further left position is held by the person seeking more or deeper social change.

There is nothing very new about this definition of the left. Most basic political labels reflect it. We have “progressives” on the left: (“we can make the world better”); “conservatives” in the middle: (“we had best leave well enough alone”); reactionaries on the right: (“we must undo past changes”).¹ “Radicals” can be of the left or right depending on whether they want a sharp and fast reversion from the status quo or sharp and fast progress from it. But a progressive is always on the left and a reactionary always on the right.

Some values and positions, through long association, have attached themselves to the very meaning of progressivism. The deepest progressive traditions hold that a world of equality and liberty, free from poverty and war, is a better world. Other progressive traditions hold that certain means, such as free speech or labor unions, are especially effective in building that better world.

A conservative might well value equality, freedom, peace, and prosperity. She just doesn’t believe there is much we can do to achieve them, and she further believes that attempts to do so will only make things worse. Since it is left to progressives to fight for these values, quite naturally they become a part of progressivism.

Why Jews Tend to Be Progressive

I know Jews who claim that they maintain their Jewish identity solely through their progressive politics and think it is un-Jewish to be right wing. This goes too far. Being a Jew and being a progressive are distinct things. But I do think there is an affinity between Jewish history and traditions and progressive politics. The long list of prominent Jews on the left and the consistent sympathy of a high percentage of Jews for progressive politics is neither random nor caused by a minor contingency of modern Jewish history.

Historically, Jews have been afflicted with most of the burdens that progressives seek to eradicate. Denied land or access to certain crafts, Jews have been condemned to poverty. Disenfranchised, they have known political powerlessness. Religious outcasts, they have experienced social ostracism. Repeatedly uprooted and expelled, Jews are the archetypal refugees. Relentlessly pressured to abandon their faith, Jews suffered for centuries on account of their convictions. Jews have been history’s premier scapegoats, blamed for plagues,

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criminality, debauched morals, degenerate art, degrading science, capitalist exploitation, communist oppression, war, and the murder of God. Jews have been the perennial target of violence and victims of war. And Jews have suffered from the most acute episode of racial persecution in history.

Thus, Jewish history provides Jews with strong reasons for progressive partisanship. Jews have good reason to believe that tolerance of inequality, authoritarianism, and oppression will work to their disadvantage. But even if a Jew believes that her situation is now so secure that she has nothing personally to fear, Jewish history should help her to empathize with those who will be harmed by a regime willing to abide social injustice. Having felt the horrors of racism and labored under the burdens of inequality and oppression, Jews should understand and share the impatience of the downtrodden for change.

Jews were the historical counterculture in Christian Europe. They were seen by the ruling majority, and saw themselves, as the Other. This marginal social position gave them the motive and perspective to question the dominant ideology. A millennial experience as cultural opposition forms a habitual skepticism about the goodness of the status quo and the wisdom of conventional thought.

In addition to having a history that groups them with the alienated and the wretched of the earth, central traditional Jewish values also make Jews natural allies of progressives. The importance of the individual's life and dignity, communal solidarity, equality before the law, and the emphasis on education are all core values in Jewish tradition and are, or should be, mainstays of the progressive vision, for they remain the most hopeful path to a better world.

- **Education:** Even a passing familiarity with Jewish tradition would demonstrate its devotion to learning. In traditional Jewish societies, scholars have the highest status. Universal male literacy was an ideal closely approached in many Jewish societies, well before it was a norm in most

other cultures. Education for the poor was a community obligation.

Progressives, too, value education. We must learn how things work so we might work them better. Ignorance contributes to poverty, violence, and inequality. Better education, more widely distributed, has long been high on the progressive agenda. This pragmatic attitude toward knowledge is also found in Jewish thought. Jews believed the democratic dissemination of knowledge throughout the community was crucial to creating a better world.

One particular aspect of education associated with the progressive outlook is the development of critical acumen. Social change requires the ability to question and challenge accepted doctrines. The questioning of authority in the Jewish tradition runs deep. Abraham argues with God over the justice of destroying Sodom. There are *aggadot* (anecdotes, parables, tales) whose moral is that God shouldn't attempt to override human understanding and application of Torah.² No authority, no matter how exalted, should impose its will absent the rational consent of the community. God commands and Jews must obey. But Jews retain the duty to question the commands, and God is duty bound to reveal his rationales. And of course, under all circumstances, the right to *kvetch* is inalienable.

- **Laws, Individuals, and the Community:** The notion of equality before the law is an ideal embedded in Jewish law. Everyone has access to the law, all can seek legal redress. And since the law rules so many facets of traditional Jewish life, this equality of rights and duties permeates much of traditional Jewish existence.

Of course, Jewish law is not devoid of conservative content. Far from it.³ But I will point out two major progressive features of Jewish law.

First is the overriding importance placed on the saving of human life. All Jewish

laws, save three, give way to the commandment to preserve human life. This principle is known as *pakuach nefesh*. A famous Talmudic precept is that to save a life is equivalent to saving the whole world.⁴ The same passage stresses that each human life is unique. It is not simply the loss of an individual that is tragic, the tragedy is the loss of *this* individual.

The three exceptions to *pakuach nefesh* are the commandments against idolatry, murder, and adultery/incest. The prohibition against murder forbids the sacrifice of one individual to save another. Each life is supremely valuable, none should be purchased at the cost of another. [But] it is not simply the individual biological life that is so precious; equally valuable is the dignity of the person. Traditional law is full of rules aimed at maintaining the individual's dignity. For example, the highest form of charity is a double blind anonymous giving. Neither benefactor nor benefitted are to know each other, protecting the recipient from any humiliation attached to being the object of charity. This brings us to the second and third exceptions to the priority of preserving life: idolatry and unchastity. A life should be preserved at all costs, except at the cost of the fundamental dignity of the individual whose life it is. Given the Talmudists' theological and sexual beliefs, choosing death over idolatry or unchastity [can be] plausibly understood as a defense of the individual's dignity. And this is very much in line with progressive thought.

Much of progressive tradition can be understood as a quest to realize universal human dignity. The "dignity of man," has been emblazoned on the banners of progressives since the French Revolution. Political rights, decent working conditions, education, health care – practically every progressive initiative in history has been advocated in the name of human dignity. Even the basic material well-being of humans was not viewed merely as an end in itself, but also as a means to recognizing the dignity of each individual.

Although leftist thought of the last century has tended to rail against "bourgeois individualism," leftist anti-individualism that valued only the collective is more plausibly viewed as reactionary than progressive. Stalinist or Maoist collectivism was a throwback to the despotic societies in which most individuals were dispensable. The individualism expressed by the Jewish tradition of *pakuach nefesh* flows with the mainstream progressive tradition, running from the Enlightenment through classical liberalism, social democracy, anarchism, and left libertarianism, all of which sought a society that highly valued all individuals.

Progressive individualism conceives of the individual as finding fulfillment as part of the community. The individualistic right and collectivist left agree that either a society can primarily value individuals and their rights or it can value the community and its rights. The individualistic right opts for individuals, the collectivist left for community. Centrists recognize the conflict and seek compromise, sometimes favoring individual rights, sometimes community needs. But right, left, and center agree that the individual and the community have opposing interests. Progressive individualists deny the conflict.⁵ They hold that neither individuals nor communities can flourish without the other. An individual person is a biologically based social creation whose humanity is constituted and sustained by continued interaction with others. Outside of a community we have no truly *human* being and certainly no human good.⁶ Conversely, a community is constituted by individuals and has no existence separate from them. A community's well-being is the well-being of its individual members. The upshot is that a community should serve individuals, but individual well-being requires communal bonds.⁷

We have already seen how Jewish tradition values individuals. If we now turn to its attitude toward the community, we shall find an equal respect. *Klal Yisroel*, the

Jewish people taken as a whole, is a moral priority throughout the tradition. We are taught that each Jew is responsible for all Jews. "Charity," support of the community poor, is morally obligatory; it is a *mitzvah*, a commandment. The troubles of each Jew were the troubles of the Jewish people, and the troubles of the Jewish people were the troubles of each Jew. Community solidarity was a corollary of the value placed on each individual. This strong sense of social responsibility is an important resource for progressives seeking to foster human solidarity. It is all the more valuable for being integrated with a deep concern for each individual.

The ultimate manifestation of Judaism's community-mindedness is its concept of salvation. The central Jewish drama is not about whether this individual is saved or that individual becomes enlightened. It is about the redemption of the entire Jewish community. There is no hint of "every man for himself" in this theology, no worrying about your own soul's fate as opposed to the fate of the communal soul.

- **Jewish Materialism:** The phrase "Jewish materialism" conjures up the antisemitic canard that Jews are a greedy, acquisitive breed, obsessed with their possessions and indifferent to the finer, more spiritual aspects of human life. Whether it is as the Shylock moneylender, the Fagin swindler, or the Bloomingdales habitué, we see this image persist throughout Western culture. The antisemitic employment of this degrading insult should not blind us to the genuinely progressive materialistic insight of Jewish tradition: "If there is no flour, there is no Torah." Judaism realizes that human spirit requires a material base. The same idea forms part of the moral foundations of Marx's work. True human history, the realm of human freedom, commences when abundant productivity frees humanity from the drudgery of alienating work and spirit-killing poverty. We cannot expect a *mensch* to act as a *mensch* when she is preoccupied with her animal needs.

Of course, compared to classic socialist thought, traditional Jewish philosophy of history is out and out idealism. God's struggle with the Jews, not the class struggle, is the key to history. But even if the fulfillment of God's Torah, rather than the eradication of poverty, the abolition of private property, or the democratic control of production, has been the main item on the Jewish historical agenda, it is a very this-worldly enterprise. Social, *material* justice is a part of Torah. Jewish respect for the flesh should be entered as a progressive credit in our ledger.

What Progressivism Does for a Secular Jewish Identity

I have been discussing how Secular Judaism can support progressive values. I now turn to the support progressivism gives to Secular Judaism. One clearly need not be any sort of Jew to be a robust progressive. But it is not at all clear that one can have a robust *secular* Jewish life unallied to progressive values. For a religious person, doing God's will serves as a unifying theme that gives life coherence and moral value. The secular Jew needs a functional analogue. Although lacking the certitude or completeness of the divine vision, a progressive vision can tie Jewish life to a coherent set of moral values. Humans can have satisfying lives and fulfilling identities without serving God, but not without serving something. What ultimately makes life worthwhile is that you are doing something worthwhile with it. Although a Secular Judaism that had no moral compass is logically possible, it is not sustainable. It cannot be successfully taught because no persuasive motive to learn it can be given. It cannot be passed through the generations because its amoral stance generates no loyalty. It is not sustainable because it does not sustain us.

Granted, progressive values are not the only values possible for Secular Judaism. Some textual or historical support can be found for almost any position. Jewish history is long, its texts massive and the work of many hands. If the Devil can quote scripture, it is no surprise that Republicans can cite Talmud.

But a *secular* Jew, needing to motivate Jewish practice without recourse to God, will find a progressive interpretation most sustaining. Perfect faith that the messiah will come, though she may tarry, reflects the progressive's optimism in a world of justice, though it too tarries. The Jewish responsibility to *work toward* the messianic age is given secular application in progressive social activism. Progressive ideology not only gives a secular meaning to Jewish history, it gives a secular meaning to Jewish theology. Without such meanings, Secular Judaism is doomed to temporary adjunct status in the life of a few generations of American Jews. Allied to a progressive vision, Secular Judaism might become a vibrant force in American Jewish life.

In Defense of Progressivism

I have been arguing that being a Jew enriches a progressive life and that being a progressive is crucial to a *secular* Jewish life. But these arguments will count for little if progressivism is judged a misguided political philosophy; for I have claimed that the essence of progressivism is a belief in humanity's ability to improve the world, and some think this belief is obviously false.

Most conservatives would argue that humans are too wicked and weak to be the agents of a better world. Our efforts toward that end, especially our political efforts, have only made things worse. The progressive is typically accused of naiveté or dishonesty. She is either innocent of the facts of life or misrepresents them to herself and others. But a nondogmatic progressivism need not ignore or hide anything; neither the difficulties of making or recognizing progress, nor the bleak prospects of achieving it. All this can be accepted to whatever degree a clear eyed, honest assessment leads. So long as that assessment doesn't judge progress impossible, progressivism remains a rational attitude.

As a guide to action, conservative pessimism will make our probable bleak future a certainty. In addition to counseling self-defeating passivity, pessimism robs the present of meaningful hope. Surely it is not certain

that things can't get better; what justifies an attitude that would have us act as if they can't? Conservatives who tell us to abandon "false" hope for this world, but don't provide hope for another, offer nothing. Conservatives who tell us to abandon "false" hope for this world and provide otherworldly hopes offer nothing a secularist can believe in.

Finally, there is the conservative fear that the quest for progress risks disaster. The progressive should have as deep an awareness of the catastrophes brought about by some genuinely progressive intentions, not to mention the horrors done by pseudo progressive ones. But the rational response to these dangers is not an abandonment of the progressive project. Rather, progressive social activism should be allied to a morality that constrains what can be done in pursuit of progress. The lives of Dorothy Day and Mohandas Ghandi, Martin Luther King and Judah Magnes, Pete Seeger and Riguberto Michu are all real models of progressivism within the bounds of morality.

Hopeful in spite of the evidence, engaged but heedful of obstacles, rightly done, Jewish tradition and progressive politics both embody an illusionless utopianism. While a plausible argument can be made that Jews have been ill-served by their utopian visions – religious and secular – and suffered greatly from attempts to realize them, one wonders how long the Jewish people would have endured without our utopian hopes, and what sort of people we would have been without them.

NOTES:

¹Here and in what follows I discuss the "progressive," "conservative," and "reactionary" as pure archetypes. Obviously any sane progressive has some skepticism concerning how much can be done to improve the human condition, just as a sane conservative must believe some improvements are possible and a sane reactionary realize that some past conditions are unrestorable.

²The story is told of a rabbi's attempt to invoke God's direct authority to counter a decision of a majority of sages. God weighs in, but is told by the majority to mind his/her own business. (See Bertram Rothchild's article elsewhere in this issue. Eds.)

³There certainly are clearly conservative elements in Jewish traditions. But they don't undermine the possibility of an overall progressive interpretation. Moreover the nonprogressive features can be used as object lesson in what needs to be overcome. Traditional Jewish patriarchy, for instance, can be a vivid example of the injustices of sexism, and the possibility of changing it. There have been a number of efforts to give the idea of "choseness" a universalist meaning. The modern Reform movement stresses the universalist interpretation – there is nothing special about Jews beyond their willingness to bear God's message, a willingness any person can participate in. Reconstructionists, in their 1945 Sabbath Prayer Book, seem to have despaired of giving a universalist twist to the doctrine and decided to abandon it.

⁴Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5.

⁵Of course, an individual's *particular* interest, even an important one, can be ultimately irreconcilable with the community's interest. As a guilty murderer, it may be in my interest to have a corrupt jury that would be open to bribes. But individualism isn't in the least advanced by corrupt juries, whereas the right to a fair trial and the presumption of innocence do serve individuals as individuals. It is these sort of "generic-individual" interests which I claim are completely compatible with the community's interests. But while

I remain hopeful about the ultimate reconcilability of generic-individual interests and communal interests, I recognize that the vagueness of the distinction between generic and particular interests, combined with our always imperfect social knowledge, will forever require compromises. Reasonable members of a sane society will always need to be prepared to settle for less than they want or feel they deserve, but the settling shouldn't end the continuing quest to find a solution that makes everyone happy.

⁶Although hermits might realize some human good outside of a community, it is arguable that even that good is parasitic on the existence of social life. The hermit had to learn the values and techniques of a reclusive ideal somewhere, not to mention the basic knowledge needed even for reclusive survival. In any event, neither traditional Jewish nor progressive thought values the recluse focused exclusively on her own spiritual well-being, uninvolved with the world. There is no Jewish or progressive good life outside of social life.

⁷This is not to say that individual or community "rights" falsely conceived (*e.g.*, the right of an individual to own a factory or the right of a community to hear only the majority language spoken) might not come into conflict with each other or with genuine human interests.